Definition: Heart of Darkness from The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide

Short novel by Joseph Conrad, published in 1902. Marlow, the narrator, tells of his journey by boat into the African interior to meet a company agent, Kurtz, who has adopted local customs and uses barbaric methods to exercise power over the indigenous people.

Summary Article: Heart of Darkness
From Brewer’s Dictionary of Modern Phrase and Fable

A short story, written in 1899 and first published in Youth: a Narrative with Two Other Stories (1902), by Joseph Conrad (1857-1924). It is based on the author’s own experience of a voyage up the Congo River in 1890 and is told by Marlow, commander of a French coasting steamer. He finds a corrupt and depraved regime under the control of the monstrous figure of Kurtz, who finally dies on board Marlow’s boat. In an epilogue, Marlow tells of visiting Kurtz’s fiancée and pretending that he died with her name on his lips. The story ends: ‘The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky - seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness.’ Kurtz's words 'The horror! The horror' (ch iii) inspired Francis Ford Coppola’s controversial film Apocalypse Now (1979) set during the Vietnam War, which has parallels with Conrad’s story. See also First lines of novels.

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